

PARTHENIA VENTURES INTO NEW MUSIC FOR VIOLS

TWO DIFFERENT VIOLS ... fugue around each other like a chromatic mirror, leaving a trail of sound luminous like mother-of-pearl...with gorgeous sound and interplay.”

These vivid words by Mark Greenfest were written in response not to an Elizabethan fantasy from the 16th century but to a newly commissioned duo for tenor and bass viols, *Fantasy*, that I wrote in a modernist idiom last year for the viol ensemble Parthenia. Rosamond Morley and Lawrence Lipnik premiered it on a program of new music written especially for the New York City-based consort. For the past several seasons, the members of Parthenia have devoted an entire evening to a program of new music.

“It’s the stretch that counts!” says Morley, Parthenia’s treble violist, speaking about the perspective on historical repertoire that is gained by venturing into new musical territory. Audiences, too, can come to appreciate their old favorites in a fresh way by exposure to

new musical ideas, but it can be a challenge for adventuresome performers to bring audiences along for the journey.

Founded in 1989, Parthenia specializes in the Renaissance repertoire for viols, especially the rich and abundant music from the Elizabethan to Jacobean eras. In 2000, Parthenia started its own New York City concert series and also made its first commission. In partnership with the late mezzo-soprano Alexandra Montano, Parthenia asked composer Phil Kline to write a piece that would involve viols, mezzo, and two children’s voices.

Lisa Terry, one of the bass violists of Parthenia, explains: “Both Larry [Lipnik, the tenor violist of Parthenia] and Alexandra had already been doing a lot of new music – Larry with Lionheart, mixing old and new pieces. Alexandra was actively involved in new music, working with Philip Glass and others. They both thought it would be nice to do a concert that included Alexandra

The members of the New York City viol consort stretch themselves as performers by regularly presenting modern works

By David Glaser

Performers and composers assemble for a photo shoot after a “Hot Off the Press” concert in March 2008.

Back Row: Frances White, David Glaser, Paul Hecht, Barbara Feldon, David Thompson, Max Lifchitz, Paul Richards, Kristin Norderval. Front Row: Beverly Au, Lawrence Lipnik, Rosamund Morley, Lisa Terry.



PHOTO: PAUL ROSS

“The viol has this special resonance, so, although quieter than modern strings, the sonority has almost a built-in ‘reverb’ effect that is most beautiful. Also, the sound has an exquisite delicacy and clarity that really allows counterpoint to sound. And I love the purity of the non-vibrato playing.”
– Frances White

singing Elizabethan songs with us, and then Alexandra had the idea to ask Phil to write a piece for the combination of her, viols, and her children’s sweet treble voices. I believe she had just worked with Phil at that time and had already discussed him writing something for her and her kids. Phil even joined us in *Poem with Paula* – singing in falsetto – dynamite!”

In 2002, Maverick Concerts in Woodstock, New York, commissioned Brian Fennelly, a professor of composition at New York University and part-time resident of Woodstock, to write a piece for Parthenia, doing so at the suggestion of Vincent Wagner, a former member of the board of EMA as well as of Maverick. The piece premiered on a program of Renaissance repertoire. That same year, Parthenia supporter Edward Truettner commissioned composer Will Ayton to set the poetry and prose of William Blake to music for Parthenia and mezzo, and the group first performed selections of Ayton’s *A Reliquary for William Blake* in October 2003 on the group’s regular New York City concert series. This was another program that mixed the new with the old. Shortly after Ayton’s premiere, Parthenia recorded a CD dedicated to his viol music (MSR Classics MS1216).

Parthenia’s interest in presenting new music interspersed with old repertoire continued for the next two seasons; in May 2005 and February 2006, works by John Stone and Nicholas Patterson were introduced in concerts featuring Renaissance repertoire. The group’s first concert completely dedicated to new music was a program of Will Ayton’s music. As a result of the success of these projects, Parthenia made a commitment to present one concert each season dedicated to newly written works. Their “Musica Nuova” concert in March 2007 featured a premiere by Anthony Piccolo, pieces new to the group by Roy Marks, and favorites from past seasons by Ayton, Fennelly, Patterson, and Kline.

March 2008’s concert, “Hot off the Press,” featured five world premieres and one work refitted for viols. In addition to my *Fantasy*, the compositions were by Max Lifchitz, Frances White, Kristin Norderval, David Thompson, and Paul Richards. Actors Paul Hecht and Barbara Feldon preceded each piece with a poem chosen to complement the music. In addition, the composers introduced their pieces to the audience and were present during the post-concert question and answer session with the performers as part of a Meet the Composers Met Life Creative Connections program. All of these components are successful outreach tools, as audience members like to hear composers introduce (and explain) their works and appreciate the opportunity to ask questions following a performance.

From left, composer Frances White with Parthenia’s Lisa Terry and Beverly Au after the “Hot Off the Press” Concert.



PHOTO: PAUL ROSS

Integrating new works

A perennial question for an ensemble interested in adding contemporary music to its repertoire is whether the new works should be integrated into its regular programs or presented in concerts devoted exclusively to new music. Beverly Au, one of Parthenia’s two bassists, acknowledges that it is difficult to integrate 21st-century music with music of the Renaissance and says a program needs to be crafted “with a strong sense of how the new and old pieces relate to each other.” Some contemporary composers write in a style that fits easily with early music. Lisa Terry, the other bass-playing member of the ensemble, says

Queen Elizabeth I

The Doubt

Kristin Norderval

h = 50

5

10

Soprano

Whispered, once in unison, then out of sync

Treble Viol

Whispered, once in unison, then out of sync

Tenor Viol

Whispered, once in unison, then out of sync

Bass Viol

Whispered, once in unison, then out of sync

Sampler

Low D and filtered bass notes

15

wit warns shun Snares threaten annoy 20

and me to such as mine and me to such as mine and

and me to such as mine and me to such as mine and

pizz and me to such as mine and me to

And.

warns shun Snares threaten annoy 25 threaten annoy

The doubt of

me to such as mine and

me to such as mine and

me to such as mine and

me to such as mine

pizz Falsehood now doth flow, and subjects

Falsehood now doth flow, and sul ponticello

Falsehood now doth flow, and sul

Will Ayton's music "mixes very well with our Renaissance repertoire because he writes so well for viol – it feels like a natural idiomatic transition between the periods." Ayton does write well for the instrument – as do other modern composers – but he also works in a rather conservative musical style. His harmonies are not unfamiliar; his melodic writing is straightforward and direct. Any music with such a clear link to the past can easily be integrated into a program of early music.

Another approach to uniting new and old works is exemplified in Kristin Norderval's *Nothing Proved*, which utilizes live electronics and voice with the viols. This piece, which was made possible by the Jerome Foundation's Composers Commissioning Program, sets texts written by Elizabeth I and sung by Norderval with readings of Elizabethan texts by actors Roberta Maxwell and Paul Hecht. For all its use of modern technology, Norderval's music is quite approachable, and the familiar elements outweigh the new. In spite of this, Terry tells of one audience member who approached her after the premiere and said, "If I'd known there was going to be electronic music on this concert, I would have stayed home!" Terry adds, "With this awareness, we usually keep our new music repertoire separate from our early music and only occasionally combine the two." The electronic component of *Nothing Proved* was not particularly challenging, so the response of this audience member reveals the kind of entrenched prejudice that early music ensembles must be willing to accept if they are going to seek to include new works on their regular programs.

In fact, when a portion of *Nothing Proved* was presented on the "Hot Off the Press" concert last year, it was very well received. During the question and answer period following the concert, many of the questions from the audience were about how the electronic sounds were generated and manipulated, and the consensus was that the new sounds were well integrated with the viols.

A program devoted to modern music allows for the exploration of new venues as well. Terry says, "It gives us a chance



PHOTO: ELLIE SEEPE

to explore more fun venues, such as art galleries and photo studios – places with a contemporary feel." Parthenia's venue for concerts of historical music is usually Corpus Christi Church; its most recent concert of new music took place at Picture Ray Studio in Manhattan.

The challenges of doing new music extend well beyond audience development. In some respects it is as if the players are learning an entirely different musical language. Terry observes, "One important aspect of working on new repertoire is the learning curve. We have to give ourselves a lot more time when preparing new works, because the new music is often a real stretch for us individually and as a group. It is really healthy for Parthenia as an ensemble to have these opportunities to work outside of our comfort zone of Renaissance style."

Au notes that because there are no "original" recordings of early music, performers tend to "create rather personal interpretations based on a combination of our knowledge of historical sources, along with a performer's own sense of how a piece might best connect with an audience. When interpreting contempo-

Singer-composer Kristin Norderval performs her work at the Corpus Christi Church in New York City in November 2008.

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– Kristin Norderval, composer

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rary music, we similarly cannot rely much on sound recordings from the past, or on an oral/aural interpretive tradition passed down from generation to generation, so in this sense early music performers are already well trained to tackle the decision-making process that goes into preparing a piece of new music.” There are challenges as well. “It is a great advantage to be able to ask the composer questions. Adding a living composer to the mix makes a performer worry just that much more about what the composer is looking for, and with early instruments, this is trickiest where a composer writes in a musical language that asks for non-traditional, extended techniques, or ‘sound effects.’

“The notation of barring, bowing, articulation, and phrasing in modern music may appear fussy or confusing at first. The conventions used in early music can be quite baffling to the newbie, just as a contemporary score can at first look undecipherable, so that an early music expert sometimes has to take two leaps into the future of music notation in order to make sense of a contemporary score. Often the same marking will mean two different things (sometimes opposite things) in early and contemporary music. (“Up” and “Down” bowing markings are just one example.) It really involves honing fluency in a different musical dialect.”

Au finds that the best part of performing new music on early instruments “is the thrill of going beyond the boundaries of historically-informed technique and idioms and yet finding ways to express the same fantastic range of human emotions and levels of musical communication through a new color palette.”

For Morley, one of the pleasures, and surprises, is what the piece will actually sound like, both on its own and in the context of the program as a whole. “So often in both early and new music, you have no idea as a performer how the music will end up sounding, how it will work in a concert. This is different from, say, a quartet performing Beethoven late

quartets. With that music there is a long tradition and plenty of interpretive examples to emulate or differentiate your performance from.”

Working with composers

Finding composers to write for Parthenia has been easy. In addition to the opportunity to work with first-rate musicians (Ayton says “Most composers would almost kill to be able to write for such an ensemble.”), many composers

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– Max Lifchitz, composer

are drawn to the particular qualities of the viol. Richard Einhorn loves the sound of the instruments: “they have an attractive, hauntingly familiar quality, a yearning, and a sense that the sound is ancient and mysterious. The ensemble sound epitomizes desire and longing, but they can also be regal or even formally abstract.”

“What I love about the sound of the consort are the rich harmonics in the tones. They are yummy and full, like really good chocolate mousse!” said Kristin Norderval.

Frances White, who, like Norderval, uses electronic media along with acoustic instruments, sees an interesting intersection between the sounds of electronics and the viol, which she says “has this special resonance, so although quieter than modern strings, the sonority has almost a built-in ‘reverb’ effect that is most beautiful. Also, the sound has an exquisite delicacy and clarity that really allows counterpoint to sound. And I love the purity of the non-vibrato playing.”

The “intimacy and delicate coloring” appealed to Max Lifchitz. When composing for unfamiliar instruments, most composers first turn to orchestration

textbooks. Unfortunately, very few of these texts have much to say about early instruments. This necessitates conversations with players. Discussions always include the particular strengths and limitations of the instruments and their ability to play the extended techniques so often required in contemporary music. Lifschitz says, “I was vaguely familiar with the tuning and ranges for each of the instruments. I was also somewhat in the dark as to how they would behave when producing effects associated with modern instruments such as pizzicato, *sul tasto*, and *sul ponticello*.”

White asked Terry to demonstrate various sonorities and also wanted examples of the great consort music to listen to. Richard Einhorn had the same request: “repertoire, repertoire, repertoire! I want to hear more of the great pieces and composers – and study their scores.”

What some composers may view as a limitation of early instruments, a somewhat narrower dynamic palette, is something that can be taken advantage of by sensitive composers. Lifschitz says, “The dynamic range of the viols is more than adequate. The viols’ mysterious veneer is most appropriate to project moods and effects that modern instruments might have trouble with.”

With their success in presenting new music and their fruitful collaborations with living composers, Parthenia is planning to continue its annual concerts of new music for viols. The ensemble is now commissioning new works by myself and Frances White, both of whom received Fromm Foundation Commissions at Harvard University to write for Parthenia. The group plans to seek funding for Richard Einhorn’s work for Parthenia and mezzo-soprano Jacqueline Horner-Kwiatek. Other interested composers are in discussion with the group; the future of new works for the viol looks very bright indeed. 🍷

Composer David Glaser is assistant professor at Stern College of Yeshiva University in New York. He has received an Academy Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Dr. Boris and Eda Rapoport Prize in Composition at Columbia University. In 2007, he was awarded a Fromm Foundation commission to compose a piece for Parthenia.